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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes the findings of a study commissioned by the Council for Exceptional Children to identify the variables that affect a special education teacher's ability to succeed and desire to continue in the field. Themes that positively influence the conditions teachers work in were identified including a sense of collegiality and professionalism, an environment of open and frequent communication, a supportive climate, availability of resources, and clarity of roles and responsibilities. Specific barriers to quality teaching performance were also identified including caseload (class size and composition), paperwork, and time for planning and collaboration. Also noted is the importance of administrative support. The report finds a growing gap between growing expectations of teachers (such as greater collaboration, parent and student counseling, and accountability for student learning) and a lack of resources (teachers spend an average of $500 of their own money per year on classroom supplies and materials). Recommendations to help create conditions that promote successful special education teaching include: defining the roles of special and general educators relative to students with exceptionalities, leveraging teacher time with technology and clerical support to reduce the paperwork burden, and creating a career continuum in special education. (DB)

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CONDITIONS OF TEACHING CHILDREN WITH EXCEPTIONAL LEARNING NEEDS: THE BRIGHT FUTURES REPORT

By

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Conditions of Teaching Children with Exceptional Learning Needs: The Bright Futures Report

Mary Ruth Coleman

In the school year 1996-97, approximately 4,000 special education teaching positions remained unfilled in the United States, and nearly 33,000 positions were staffed by teachers not fully qualified in special education (US Department of Education, 1999). Special education teachers leave the field at about twice the rate of their general education counterparts (Cook & Boe, 1998). Because this situation has a direct impact on the quality of services delivered to students with special needs, attracting and keeping qualified special education teachers has become a major concern to the education community. This digest summarizes the findings of a study commissioned by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) to identify the variables that affect a special education teacher's ability to succeed and desire to continue in the field.

The Bright Futures Report

In 1998, CEC appointed a Presidential Commission on the Conditions of Special Education Teaching and Learning. Its charge was twofold:

- Identify the obstacles and barriers that obstruct high quality teaching, and
- Develop an action agenda to ensure that every student with exceptional learning needs is taught under optimal conditions for learning.

Because children with exceptionalities are taught in a variety of settings by a variety of educational personnel, stakeholders for this study included both general and special educators. A pilot web survey was posted, focus groups were held across the country, a major literature review was completed, and a national survey was conducted to identify current conditions.

Variables that Affect a Teacher's Ability to Succeed

Several themes that influence the conditions of teaching were identified. A sense of collegiality and professionalism, an environment of open and frequent communication, a climate of support, the availability of resources, and a clarity of roles and responsibilities all contribute to a sense of satisfaction for a job well done.

Specific Barriers that Obstruct Quality Performance

In addition to these themes, specific aspects of teaching students with exceptionalities include caseloads (class size and composition), paperwork, and time for planning or collaboration.

Caseload (class size and composition) was the primary concern of special education teachers. Teachers reported that being assigned a large number of students, combined with an extended caseload for consultation with students whose primary placement is in general education, has made their job overwhelming. General education class sizes are in some cases smaller than those in special education. Often, one teacher is expected to teach multiple subjects, on multiple grade levels, to students with multiple exceptionalities. It is not unusual for a special education teacher to prepare more than 50 lessons per day to address her students' direct instructional needs (Coleman, 2000).

It is not surprising that paperwork was the second major concern for special education teachers, for it follows directly from the issue of caseload and class size. The typical length of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for students with exceptional learning needs is between eight and sixteen pages, and IEPs are just the tip of the iceberg. Extended paperwork involves much more, including forms for the system or state, minutes from all meetings, reports for students who are evaluated but not placed, medical assistance applications, telephone logs, progress reports, notes to parents, curriculum reports, discipline records, child abuse reports, applications for vocational services, and transition plans. It takes special education teachers between one and two days per week just to manage the paper trail. With all this paperwork, the need for technology and clerical support is acute, yet special education teachers report that they are often the last to receive computers and rarely have the appropriate software.

Time for consultation and planning was also ranked as one of the top three concerns for special education teachers. Special educators report feeling isolated—there are few opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and time for consultation and planning is non-existent. The growing number of students with exceptionalities being served in general education classrooms has magnified this frustration. Logic would have it that the students with the most intense needs would receive the most concentrated forms of "team" planning, communication, and collaboration to meet those needs. For students with exceptionalities, however, this is not the case.

An extension of this issue is the importance of administrative support. When administrators are knowledgeable and supportive, teachers feel that their load has been lightened, but when this is not the case, problems emerge. The findings from the survey showed that the teachers' perspectives differed significantly from that of administrators on all of the dimensions assessed. Teachers reported greater concerns, more frustration, and a growing sense that their plight is not understood. Administrators were much more positive regarding the conditions of teaching, essentially indicating that things are not that bad. This finding was trouble-

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some in part because teachers who leave the field cite a lack of administrative understanding of and support for their work as a key factor in their decision to leave.

The Growing Gap Between Expectations and Resources

One of the major difficulties teachers face today is that their roles are changing in response to the demands of a rapidly changing society and profession. Teachers are facing expectations of greater collaboration, parent and student counseling, and demands for content knowledge and accountability for students' learning. As these changes unfold, there is a growing sense of urgency focused on the need to prepare teachers for the new expectations. A reasonable response to this would be to provide intense, ongoing personnel preparation, both pre- and in-service, and for both general and special educators. Teachers report, however, that little is being done. "Being unprepared" to meet the needs of students continues to be a frequently cited reason for teacher attrition.

Teachers cannot do their best work without the appropriate tools. Both special and general education teachers report that they often lack specialized resources and materials for students with exceptional learning needs. To make up for this deficit, teachers spend an average of $500 of their own money per year on classroom supplies and materials. The need for high-quality, content-focused, research-supported materials for teaching students with exceptional learning needs is critical if students are to successfully master important curriculum.

While expectations of teachers have changed radically, little is being done to prepare or support teachers to meet these demands. These issues are not simple and there is no simple solution:

- General education teachers report growing numbers of students with exceptionalities in their classes with little to no time for collaborative planning with special education teachers;
- Teachers report feeling inadequately prepared to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities, yet personnel preparation opportunities are limited;
- Paperwork is overwhelming special educators, yet they are the last to receive the technology and clerical support needed;
- The role of special education teachers has changed and preservice programs have not kept pace;
- Students with exceptionalities are expected to master more of the general curriculum—at higher levels—yet most special educators report little content area preparation;
- The range and intensity of students' needs has increased, yet little has been done to systematically support teachers in meeting these needs.
- The shortage of qualified special education teachers is critical, yet state licensing processes are riddled with problems, creating major obstacles with recruitment efforts.

Creating Conditions that Promote Successful Special Education Teaching

Creating conditions that allow students with exceptionalities to be most successful will take a concerted and coordinated effort. The Commission called upon the educational community to become partners in assuring three outcomes: First, that every student with exceptionalities will receive individualized services and support from a caring and competent professional. Second, that every special and general educator has the teaching and learning conditions to practice effectively. And third, that every instructional leader establishes clear expectations for the use of effective and validated instructional practices. To achieve this vision, the following recommendations were suggested:

- Define the roles of special and general educators relative to students with exceptionalities
- Create the context for high-quality practice
- Leverage time with technology tools and clerical support to reduce the paperwork burden
- Standardize decision-making processes
- Create a career continuum in special education
- Develop cohesive professional licensure systems
- Provide systems supports.

The United States is facing a crisis in attracting and retaining qualified special education teachers. This situation has a direct impact on the quality of services delivered to students with special needs. By identifying the conditions that obstruct quality performance and drive teachers from the field, the Bright Futures Report has laid the groundwork for addressing this crisis.

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